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General Assembly

Fifty-eighth session

Official Records

89th plenary meeting
Thursday, 10 June 2004, 10 a.m.
New York

President: The Hon. Julian R. Hunte ..... (Saint Lucia)

The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Floods in the Dominican Republic and in Haiti

The President: Before proceeding to the item on our agenda, I should like, on behalf of the members of the General Assembly, to extend our deepest sympathy to the Governments and peoples of the Dominican Republic and of Haiti for the tragic loss of life and extensive material damage that have resulted from the recent flooding in the two countries. May I also express the hope that the international community will show its solidarity and respond promptly and generously to any requests from the Dominican Republic and Haiti for assistance in their current plight and to any appeal for aid.

I now call on the representative of the Dominican Republic.

Mr. Del Rosario Ceballos (Dominican Republic) (*spoke in Spanish*): On behalf of the Government and the people of the Dominican Republic, I should like to thank you, Sir, for the kindness you showed my country in referring to the regrettable catastrophe that has occurred in a part of our border area with Haiti. Tragedy and sorrow have struck our island once again. What has happened in our border area has plunged into mourning two nations that share the same territory and destiny.

We Dominicans and Haitians feel distressed at hearing, day after day, painful news of the grave floods in that area, which have taken the lives of many victims and have left so many families homeless. The material losses are reaching alarming numbers. So far, the floods in Jimaní have killed at least 500 people and affected approximately 1,000, with losses of homes, livestock and crops. The violence of the waters was of such a magnitude that tons of stones, gravel, tree trunks and debris were swept away. The floods have affected more than 900 families in the Dominican part of the island.

However, despite the negative impact of this natural disaster in the border province, this tragedy has awakened the interest and solidarity of individuals and institutions both in the Dominican Republic and abroad. Amid this regrettable tragedy, it has been encouraging to see the evidence of solidarity in recent days. Help has come spontaneously from all around the world.

On behalf of my country's Government, I wish to express most heartfelt thanks to the countries and international organizations that have provided donations and assistance for those affected in Jimaní.

For several days, experts from my country and from various friendly countries and international organizations have been working on the ground to assess the damage caused by this catastrophe and have been evaluating the short- and medium-term needs. Those needs have been met in part by the urgent steps taken to build housing for those affected, by assistance from our compatriots abroad and by the cooperation of friendly Governments that have sent clothing, food,

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medicine and psychological and psychiatric medical care.

The work of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, with the assistance, resolve and concern of the European Union and of many friendly and supportive countries, has enabled us to alleviate the terrible impact of this natural disaster's tragic effects. The Jimaní tragedy has inspired genuine feelings of solidarity that will not be forgotten, either by the Government of the Dominican Republic or, I am sure, by those who have been deeply distressed and affected by this regrettable tragedy and who have received consolation from our friends.

The President: I now call on the representative of Haiti.

Mr. Merores (Haiti) (*spoke in French*): We thank you, Mr. President, for having given us an opportunity to honour the memory of those who died or disappeared on the tragic night of 23-24 May 2004, when border regions between the Dominican Republic and the Republic of Haiti were so severely affected by a terrible flood. On both sides of the island, we continue to assess our losses of property and human life.

The toll is heavy — very heavy — for both countries. For the Republic of Haiti, the numbers continue to increase as the search operations continue, led jointly by the Haitian authorities and international organizations. Initial assessments indicate that more than 2,500 are dead or missing and that the chances of finding anyone alive among the latter are very slim, if not non-existent. The catastrophe took the population by surprise in the middle of the night. The furious waters destroyed or damaged more than 2,000 houses and displaced or otherwise affected more than 30,000 people. Hundreds of cattle were swept away and entire communities engulfed. Against the backdrop of that grim picture, we must underscore the fact that the bodies that have not yet been found, which pose a serious danger to the population, are sources of great concern because of the very real threat of epidemics.

Grief and desolation have already gripped all Haitian households, both inside and outside the country. National and international solidarity are more than ever an obligation. There is a real duty to help in order to avert a worst-case scenario on the island. Indeed, the Haitian people and the Haitian public and private sectors have come together to assist the affected populations, despite the economic and financial difficulties caused by the lengthy crisis that they have just experienced.

The international community has also mobilized to assist those affected by demonstrating its sympathy, by directly taking part in the search operations and assessing the damage, by providing first aid, and by making donations, in cash and in kind. The Haitian Government would like to express its gratitude to all who provided assistance. However, that solidarity and cooperation must continue.

The disaster, having taken place at a particularly sensitive and difficult time in the history of the Republic of Haiti, adds yet another challenge to the already lengthy list of problems of all kinds facing the current Government.

Controlled deforestation, which is practised throughout almost the whole of Haiti, is one of the deep-rooted causes of the floods that all too frequently plunge the country into disarray, mourning and sadness. More than 80 per cent of the country has been deforested, despite the praiseworthy efforts of national and international organizations and of private groups involved in reforestation programmes.

Such deforestation is, we believe, a direct consequence of the underdeveloped state of the country. Our farmers clearly understand the use of trees as a means of protecting the earth against erosion and flooding, and hence as a means of protecting their means of subsistence. They are fully aware of the harmony that must prevail among human beings and nature. However, they also have immediate needs: to survive, to eat, to take care of their children and to send them to school, and deforestation is, in the near term, a quick way of meeting their needs, in the absence of other sources of revenue or oversight mechanisms. Most of the population uses wood charcoal, because the cost of substitutes such as propane gas, kerosene and so on are almost prohibitive, particularly in a country where unemployment, real and hidden, is rampant.

Deforestation is one of the ills that plague the rural inhabitants of Haiti, impoverish them and plunge the country even deeper into poverty. It is clear that additional efforts are needed in order to be able to lower the price of alternative products, thereby enabling a broader segment of the people of the third

world, who face the same problems as Haiti, to access them.

In addition, organizations involved in reforestation must receive the necessary support from international, regional and local institutions in order to enable the implementation of more viable and sustainable policies, which would help to protect lives and property by discouraging deforestation and promoting reforestation and environment protection, while helping rural communities to find other sources of revenue and establish other energy sources.

On the night of 23 to 24 May 2004, Haiti, like its neighbour, the Dominican Republic, experienced the bitter consequences of the lack of a national and global vision in terms of reforestation, and today it mourns the loss of thousands of its sons — sons who could have truly participated in the creation of a new, more just, equitable and inclusive society, one that would help to meet their needs without putting their lives in peril, mortgaging their future or endangering the physical, moral or economic security of their offspring.

The Republic of Haiti reiterates its sincere gratitude and appreciation to all those that have assisted us in this sad and sombre period of its existence and urges them to continue to support it in its efforts to fight underdevelopment and its consequences.

Agenda item 124 (*continued*)

Scale of assessments for the apportionment of the expenses of the United Nations (A/58/688/Add.9)

The President: I should like to draw the attention of the General Assembly to document A/58/688/Add.9, in which the Secretary-General informs the President of the General Assembly that, since the issuance of his communications contained in documents A/58/688 and addenda 1 to 8, Afghanistan has made the necessary payment to reduce its arrears below the amount specified in Article 19 of the Charter.

May I take it that the General Assembly duly takes note of the information contained in this document?

It was so decided.

Agenda item 4

Election of the President of the General Assembly

Election of the President of the General Assembly for the fifty-ninth session

The President: In accordance with rule 30 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly, as amended by Assembly resolution 56/509 of 8 July 2002, I now invite members of the General Assembly to proceed to the election of the President of the General Assembly for the fifty-ninth session.

May I recall that, in accordance with paragraph 1 of the annex to General Assembly resolution 33/138 of 19 December 1978, the President of the General Assembly at its fifty-ninth session should be elected from among the African States.

In that connection, I was informed by the Chairman of the African Group for the month of February 2004 that the group has endorsed the Minister of State, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Cooperation and la Francophonie of Gabon, His Excellency Mr. Jean Ping, for the presidency of the General Assembly at its fifty-ninth session.

Taking into account the provisions of paragraph 16 of annex VI to the rules of procedure, I therefore declare His Excellency Mr. Jean Ping of Gabon elected by acclamation President of the General Assembly for the fifty-ninth session.

It is my pleasure, on behalf of the members of the General Assembly and on my own behalf, to congratulate the President-elect of the General Assembly at its fifty-ninth session, His Excellency Mr. Jean Ping, Minister of State and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Cooperation and la Francophonie of Gabon on his election to this high office.

Our President-elect comes to this significant leadership position with attributes that will redound to the benefit of this General Assembly, and, importantly, to the benefit of the world's peoples, in whose service the United Nations works. That is evident from his curriculum vitae, which is an impressive testament to his experience, dedication and accomplishments.

Mr. Ping has served his Government for more than three decades. The numerous portfolios he has held as Minister of the Government of Gabon in areas including economics, the environment and technology,

fall within the spectrum of critical issues challenging the United Nations today. His experience and expertise in those areas have no doubt prepared him to bring new insights and perspectives to the tasks at hand.

As President of the General Assembly at its fifty-eighth session, I have approached the work of the Assembly with continuity in mind, conscious of the fact that, if the work of the United Nations is to advance and progress, we must continue to build a firm foundation for it. I therefore hope that the progress we are making at this session will help make Mr. Ping's tenure — and, importantly, members' cooperation and collaboration with him — both dynamic and far reaching.

The fifty-eighth session of the General Assembly has to date been a demanding one, in which we have sought to advance the work of the Organization in critical areas, including economic and social development. We have dedicated much effort to revitalizing the work of the General Assembly and to better positioning it to carry out the role set out for it and the goals and the objectives it is expected to accomplish on behalf of the people of the world, who are now more discerning and articulate and are increasingly making their views known, including through organizations of civil society.

Concrete measures have been adopted, in resolution 58/126, with a more focused and effective Assembly in view. Forging a closer working relationship with the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council, refocusing some of the Assembly's priorities and strengthening the Office of the President for the fifty-ninth and future sessions are but some of the issues on which we have been able to agree at this session.

Much work, however, remains to be done. A long list of critical issues, some long-standing, some current and some as yet unforeseen, will challenge the President and the membership during the fifty-ninth session of the General Assembly in much the same way we were challenged during the fifty-eighth session. A pressing priority, for example, will be preparations for the 2005 high-level plenary meeting of the General Assembly for review of the integrated follow-up and implementation of the outcomes of major United Nations conferences and summits in the economic and social fields, including the Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals. Attention will have to be given urgently to agreeing on a date, the format and the modalities for the high-level plenary meeting. There are only some 15 months left for preparation of that significant event.

The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) has done much now to deepen our understanding of the struggles in which the countries of the African continent are involved across a broad spectrum of challenges. It also points the way forward in addressing and, where possible, preventing conflicts and catastrophes and promoting sustainable development in Africa. In its initiatives to further galvanize the continent and to work with the African Union and with global support, the Assembly will have an asset in President-elect Ping, a son of Africa. His experience and understanding will, I believe, be pivotal in the Assembly's cooperative efforts with Africa, as the continent continues to chart the course of its own destiny, including advancing the implementation and the objectives of NEPAD.

A majority of countries of the developing world continue to be challenged in today's rapidly changing global environment. It is important, I believe, that the United Nations continue to make space for focused consideration of matters that directly affect States or groups of States. I wish to refer here to the International Meeting to Review the Implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, to be held in Mauritius. The convening of that meeting, the success of which can make a significant contribution to the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals, falls to the presidency of the fifty-ninth session.

There are two additional works in progress that I believe it important to mention here — the revitalization of the General Assembly and the reform of the Security Council. These are issues that will continue to benefit from and test the leadership of the President to accomplish positive outcomes with the cooperation of the membership. There are issues on which we must continue our efforts to forge consensus, even as we look forward to receiving at the fifty-ninth session the recommendations of the High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change appointed by the Secretary-General. The broad remit of the Panel gives it scope to make recommendations that could contribute to the Assembly's initiatives in those areas. I am sure that the recommendations of the Panel will

receive the full and active consideration of the Assembly.

It is my goal in the remaining months of the fifty-eighth session to bring to safe harbour as many of the efforts, initiatives and issues we are currently addressing as possible, so as to provide a clear guide to assist the forthcoming session to sail as far and as smoothly as possible. On behalf of President-elect Ping and on my own account, let me thank you, the members of the General Assembly, for the strong support and deep commitment you have given to the efforts that we have made and to progress yet to be made. Let me also thank the Secretariat, and particularly the Department of General Assembly and Conference Management, for their partnership in our work.

In my acceptance speech upon my election as President of the fifty-eighth session of the General Assembly in June 2003, I pledged my full commitment to the work of the General Assembly and of the United Nations. Today I again make a pledge to do all that I can to assist President-elect Ping and to ensure a smooth transition and handover of the presidency in September, as the General Assembly anticipated when it determined that the President of the forthcoming session should be elected in advance. I know that I can count on members' support and that they will join me in wishing Mr. Ping every success.

It is my pleasure now to invite His Excellency Mr. Jean Ping, Minister of State and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Cooperation and la Francophonie of Gabon, who has just been elected President of the General Assembly for the fifty-ninth session, to take the floor.

Mr. Ping (Gabon) (*spoke in French*): I wish at the outset to reiterate our feelings of solidarity and compassion to the Government of Haiti and the Government of the Dominican Republic following the natural disaster that has recently struck the populations of those two countries.

The Assembly has just elected me to preside over the fifty-ninth session of the General Assembly, and I wish to express to members my tremendous pleasure and deep emotion in addressing the Assembly on this particularly joyous occasion. I clearly see in this election a mark of consideration for, and a tribute to, my country, Gabon, to its President, His Excellency El Hadj Omar Bongo Ondimba, and to the entire African continent.

I wish first to express my deep appreciation and tremendous gratitude to all member States for the honour they have granted me in entrusting me with the presidency of the General Assembly. I should like especially to thank the Group of African States, and those of its members from the Central African region in particular, without whose assistance my candidacy would have been neither proposed nor accepted.

I reiterate to you, Sir, my sincere congratulations on the skill with which you have conducted the work of this session of the General Assembly. I also reiterate my country's full support for you in the pursuit of the noble objectives of our Organization. In that respect, I appreciate the magnitude of the task before me as I succeed such an eminent personality as you. I have no doubt that your wise advice, based on experience, will be extremely useful to me.

This election marks the tenth African presidency of our Assembly, thereby crowning nearly half a century of my country's active participation in the noble mission of the United Nations. That mission is clearly to build a better, more just and more united world in which present and future generations will be free from the ravages of warfare and subjugation to underdevelopment. I assure members that I and my country are fully prepared to assume that lofty mission, but as they know so well, its achievement will depend greatly on the participation of all in a spirit of dialogue, tolerance and mutual understanding.

I can state unequivocally that such a spirit has prevailed throughout this session. That has been evidenced in the meaningful progress made in revitalizing the work of the General Assembly, which has strengthened its role as a central organ. Clearly, the undertaking of reform, far from being an end in itself, must be a means of enabling the United Nations to pursue the important missions that the founding fathers assigned to it. I propose, once I take office, to pursue broadened consultations in order to continue the necessary effort of revitalizing our Organization that you, Sir, have begun.

In moving forward steadfastly in that area, the support of the Secretary-General will be valuable. I take this opportunity to reiterate to him the support and sincere congratulations of my country on the faith and resolve with which he has pursued the reform and

modernization so sorely needed by the United Nations. Faced with the myriad challenges to our world — be they ongoing armed conflict, terrorist threats, the proliferation of weapons, the pandemics of HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases or increasing poverty — we must work together to forge a broader, universal awareness of the need resolutely to counter all such scourges.

We will undoubtedly have the opportunity to return to all of those issues at the fifty-ninth session, in particular in considering the report of the Panel of Eminent Personalities that the Secretary-General has established. It is for that noble aim, with the support of all members and of the Secretary-General, that I propose to work throughout my term.

The President: I wish to inform representatives that there will be an opportunity to extend their congratulations to President-elect Ping at the Indonesian Lounge after the adjournment of this meeting.

I now call on the representative of Burkina Faso, who will speak on behalf of the Group of African States.

Mr. Kafando (Burkina Faso) (*spoke in French*): Through me, the African Group extends its warmest congratulations to Mr. Jean Ping, Minister of State, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Cooperation and la Francophonie of Gabon, on his well-deserved election to the presidency of the General Assembly at its fifty-ninth session.

As the new President, he will succeed Mr. Julian Hunte, whom we will warmly remember as a man who did a great deal to speed the reform of the United Nations system, and especially the revitalization of the General Assembly. That is why we wished to pay tribute to President-elect Ping's predecessor as well and to thank him wholeheartedly for his excellent work.

Africa, obviously, is extremely honoured by the distinction given to one of its eminent sons. The choice augurs well for significant progress in our common Organization, for the reforms that need to be completed and for the promotion of peace so sorely needed on our continent, which, unfortunately, has been stricken by so many conflicts.

The personal qualities, well-known competence and rich experience of the President-elect made him a fine candidate. Having been Minister for Foreign Affairs since 1979, and having previously undertaken other ministerial functions and represented Gabon in such international organizations as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the World Bank and the International Organization of la Francophonie, President-elect Jean Ping assuredly has all the qualifications necessary in order fully, effectively and worthily to discharge the responsibilities that we have just conferred upon him by acclamation.

On that basis, the African Group wishes him every success in the tasks ahead, at a time when the delicacy of the international situation requires a wise and lucid leader of his calibre. We offer him all our encouragement and our fullest cooperation.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Pakistan, who will speak on behalf of the Group of Asian States.

Mr. Akram (Pakistan): First of all, on behalf of the States members of the Asian Group and on my own account, allow me to express our heartfelt condolences on the tragic loss of precious lives in the Dominican Republic and in Haiti as a result of the recent floods. We fully sympathize with, and grieve with, the peoples and the Governments of the Dominican Republic and of Haiti.

On behalf of the Group of Asian countries, I would like to express our most sincere felicitations to His Excellency Mr. Jean Ping, Minister of State, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Cooperation and la Francophonie of Gabon, on his election as President of the General Assembly for its fifty-ninth session. The practice of electing the President of the Assembly three months in advance of the commencement of the term not only ensures continuity in the work of the presidency but also contributes to the more efficient functioning of the Assembly.

May I take this opportunity, Mr. President, to convey to you our deep appreciation and high tribute for your outstanding leadership of the General Assembly at its fifty-eighth session. We particularly appreciate your efforts towards the strengthening of the Assembly as the chief deliberative, policy-making and representative organ of the United Nations.

We are confident that His Excellency Mr. Jean Ping, who has served his country with great distinction

as the Foreign Minister of Gabon and in a number of other public offices, will be able, Sir, to build on the constructive work accomplished under your distinguished presidency. His vast experience in politics and diplomacy and his long association with the United Nations will provide the Assembly with the leadership and the vision required, at this important and decisive juncture in international relations, to advance the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

The States members of the Asian Group look forward to working closely with the President-elect, Mr. Jean Ping, a distinguished son of Africa. We assure him of our full support and cooperation during his tenure as President of the General Assembly.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Slovenia, who will speak on behalf of the Group of Eastern European States.

Ms. Tomič (Slovenia): At the outset, the Eastern European States wish to express our deepest sympathy to the peoples of the Dominican Republic and of Haiti following the floods in those countries.

On behalf of the States of the Eastern European Group, I would like to express our most sincere congratulations to His Excellency Mr. Jean Ping, Minister of State, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Cooperation and la Francophonie of the Gabonese Republic, on his election as President of the General Assembly for its fifty-ninth session. We are confident that, with his experience in the highest diplomatic and other posts, the newly elected President will provide the leadership and the commitment needed at this moment in international relations during deliberations at the next session of the General Assembly. I would like to assure him of the full support of our Group in the many demanding tasks that will lie before this body during the forthcoming session.

I would like also to take this opportunity to express our deepest appreciation and gratitude to you, Mr. President, for your efforts and commitment during the current, fifty-eighth, session. In many ways, with your energetic and tireless leadership, you have set a positive example for General Assembly sessions to come. We especially commend you for your continued efforts on General Assembly revitalization, which demonstrate that it is possible to discuss constructively and to move forward on issues that, maybe, not so long ago seemed deadlocked and on which results seemed unattainable.

On this occasion, we are encouraged by the pledge of the newly elected President to continue on the same course during the fifty-ninth session of the General Assembly. We can assure him that the Eastern European Group States will continue to give our full support to the process of the revitalization of the General Assembly, the improvement of its working methods and the streamlining of its agenda.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Guyana, who will speak on behalf of the Latin American and Caribbean States.

Mr. Talbot (Guyana): May I first join in the expressions of sympathy and solidarity with the Governments and the peoples of the Dominican Republic and of Haiti in connection with the disasters suffered by those sister countries of our region.

It is an honour for me, on behalf of the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States, to extend sincere felicitations to His Excellency Mr. Jean Ping, Minister of State, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Cooperation and la Francophonie of the Gabonese Republic, on his unanimous election to the presidency of the General Assembly for its fifty-ninth session. Mr. Ping brings to the presidency a wealth of political and diplomatic experience, acquired over a considerable period of time, which, we are confident, will enable him to fulfil the high expectations attached to his new office. I wish to assure the President-elect that, in the discharge of his duties as President of the fifty-ninth session, he will be able to count on the dedicated cooperation and support of the members of the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States, and to wish him every success in his new mission.

In congratulating your successor, Mr. President, allow me, on behalf of the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States, also to pay tribute to you for your effective stewardship of the current session and for the progress made so far on several fronts, notably in the revitalization of the work of the Assembly. We look forward, in cooperation with the rest of the entire membership, to carrying forward the process of restoring to the Assembly the role and authority envisaged for it in the Charter and, in so doing, to building on the advances that you have made.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Liechtenstein, who will speak on behalf of the Western European and other States.

Mr. Wenaweser (Liechtenstein): On behalf of the Group of Western European and other States, I have the pleasure and the honour of extending our sincere congratulations and warm welcome to His Excellency Mr. Jean Ping, Minister of State, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Cooperation and la Francophonie of the Gabonese Republic. We are convinced that he will be able to continue the dynamic leadership exercised by you, Mr. President, thanks in particular to his ample experience in international relations, including within the United Nations, the African Union, the World Bank, the United Nations Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization and other institutions, as well as to the great variety of his current and previous portfolios within the Government of Gabon. We trust, Sir, that the handover in the President's office will be smooth and efficient and that the incoming President will be able to benefit from the processes and arrangements introduced by you.

On behalf of the Group of Western European and other States, I also wish to assure the incoming President that the members of the Group will provide him with all the support and cooperation necessary to make the fifty-ninth session of the General Assembly successful and to contribute to further enhancing the standing of this main organ within the United Nations system.

The President: I invite representatives to remain seated, because we still have some work to do to complete this process: consecutive meetings of the six Main Committees for the election of their Chairmen, Vice-Chairmen and Rapporteurs. Those meetings will be followed immediately by the 90th plenary meeting, for the election of the 21 Vice-Presidents of the General Assembly for the fifty-ninth session.

The meeting rose at 11 a.m.